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ABSTRACT

Both women and blacks are often seen as inferior, emotional, harmless, content in their places, and nonverbally submissive, and are subject to overt discrimination in education, employment, and politics. Assertiveness training, a popular means used by women to overcome or combat sexism, could be equally effective in combatting racism. Assertive behavior, in contrast to passive or aggressive behavior, occurs when one stands up for his or her legitimate rights without violating those of others. There are five barriers to assertive responses to racism: (1) a feeling of responsibility for another's feelings, (2) a feeling that self-assertion might make others angry, (3) lack of persistence, (4) fear of losing the approval of others, and (5) the belief that nonassertive behavior is polite and considerate. After recognizing these barriers, it is important to note specific verbal approaches that can be used to combat verbal examples of racism, including confrontational assertion, anger assertion, and repetition of a position through such techniques as the "broken record" (repeating a statement several times), or "fogging" (acknowledging some truth in another's statement, then repeating your own feelings or statements). Such assertive approaches provide a calm, reasonable way of expressing feelings or anger without infringing upon others' rights, thereby forcing others to reexamine their attitudes and behavior and increasing self-esteem. (HTH)

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The Interplay Between Racism and Sexism: Using Assertiveness Training Techniques to Reduce Racism

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This paper attempts to bridge a gap between interpersonal communication and intercultural communication by suggesting the application of interpersonal skills to intercultural/interracial communication situations. I will outine how assertiveness training which has been widely adapted to aid women in dealing with sexism can be equally valid as a technique to combat racism. Thus I would like to begin by pointing out the similarities between racism and sexism in the United States. Both women and blacks have been singled out from others in society and subjected to differential and unequal treatment. Since both racism and sexism have resulted not only in a loss of rights and opportunities but outright discrimination, the analogy seems to be one worth developing.

To begin with, certain segments of society have viewed both blacks and women as having a castelike status (Hacker, p. 410). In terms of physical and mental attributes, both were seen as having inferior intelligence, smaller brains, and producing fewer geniuses. While these attitudes may be less prevalent today, they are still being promoted. In September of 1980, I picked up a copy of the National Vanguard in the student union at the University of Kansas. This periodical contained several articles contending that blacks had smaller brains and less intellectual capacities than the white race. Similar attitudes about the intellectual inferiority of women were noted by Jo Freeman who cites quotations from male faculty members at the University of Chicago. "Any girl who gets this far has got to be a kook," responded a University of Chicago faculty member after a female graduate student asked him to serve on her dissertation committee. Other comments included: "We expect women who come here to be competent, good students, but we don't expect them to be brilliant or original, " (Freeman, p. 194). "The girls get good grades because they study hard, but they don't have any originality," (Harris, p. 297). Such negatively ascribed attributes are unfortunately not only inferred about physical and intellectual traits, but also psychological traits. While blacks were seen as emotional, primitive, and childlike, so too are women seen as less responsible, more inconsistent, and emotionally unstable. Cartoons, textbooks, and the mass media often portray women as emotionally unstable, financially irresponsible and dependent on a man to take care of them.

The analogy of inferiority as applied to both blacks and women has a built-in rationalization, so that whites and males need not feel guilty about promoting policies that support sexism and racism. The rationalization is that both are harmless if they keep their place and moreover, that both are contented in their

subordinate role. Thus "inferior" blacks and "weaker" women are harmless and perhaps even beneficial to society if they keep their place, for as we all know "woman's place is in the home." Guilt is further avoided by perpetuating the myth of contentment. Prior to the Civil War, plantation owners contended that slaves were happy and content since they had all their needs met and did not have to worry about providing for themselves and their families. They were being "protected" from financial burdens and responsibilities. Similarly, the truly feminine woman is supposedly happy in a subordinate role as an unpaid housewife. Marabel Morgan proudly proclaims in The Total Woman that nothing could be more satisfying than to cater to the wants and desires of her husband. Even today, there are subtle assumptions in many organizations that blacks ought to be happy to have a position in middle level management and not strive to advance beyond that level. Women in such organizations are often viewed as satisfied with being secretaries with goals toward starting a family. Certainly these women would not want more responsibility or pressure or travel that could divert their attentions from present or future families.

Still another area of comparison lies in nonverbal cues. Both blacks and women tend to adopt nonverbal attitudes of accommodation. Nancy Henley in Body Politics compares the female tendency to smile to the black person's steeotype of shuffling along. Both may conceal real feelings and treat whites and males in a deferential or flattering manner. Both women and blacks often respond as though operating in a subordinate position. They may give the appearance of helplessness or ignorance to bolster the ego of the dominant person. "Don't act too smart or you will be rejected as being out of place," is an admonition still widely accepted. Allow the dominant white men to set the rules, to interrupt you, and to control the interaction nonverbally as well as verbally (Hacker, p. 411).

Moreover, both women and blacks have experienced overt discrimination in numerous societal institutions. Discrimination embraces such areas as education, employment, and political representation. It is a widely documented fact that women and blacks are underrepresented on university faculties and when present, exist primarily at the levels of instructor and assistant professor. In employment, the situation is even more grim than in education. In 1975 the average weekly wage for all men was $184.50, while the average weekly wage for all women was $121.00 (Adams, p. 103). Unions are primarily male institutions with less than 1 in 5 union members being women (Adams, p. 103). "Of some 10,000 federal

jobs that pay over $26,000 per year, only 1.5% are held by women, " (Lynn, p. 380). For blacks the employment outlook is even more grim. According to a June 1979 article on the state of the black movement in America,

> Nearly three times as many black males are out of work today as were 10 years ago... White high school dropouts have a lower unemployment rate than blacks with a couple years of college... At least one out of every four black workers in this nation is unemployed. The last time that many white people were jobless we called it the Great Depression! (Olson, p. 19-20).

Politically, discrimination should be readily apparent. How many black or female politicians can you think of on the national level? We have yet to see a woman appointed as the Chief Justice or a black or woman run for President or Vice-President on the ticket of a major political party. "Although blacks represent 10% of the national electorate, they still hold less than 1% of the elected offices!" (Olson, p.21).

Finally, both blacks and women have experienced negative labeling used as a weapon against them. Sometimes the weapon operates on an unintentional level. Whites often used words like "colored", "Negro" and "boy" without being consciously aware of the hidden antagonism they were generating. Similarly, many men will use words like "chick", "girl" or "honey" without realizing the impact those words have on receivers. It is at this point that both women and blacks need to consider how to respond to such inequities.

Thus the evidence seems overwhelming that a strong case can be made for the comparability of blacks and women in terms of how they are perceived by society. They are often seen as inferior, emotional, harmless, content in their place, nonverbally submissive, and subject to overt discrimination in education, employment, and politics. Such selective perception and subsequent behavior patterns argue convincingly that both groups may face similar obstacles in expressing their rights and feelings. Keeping in mind the comparability of racism and sexism and the resultant negative effects, let us examine what benefits may accrue from application of assertiveness techniques.

Assertiveness training has gained great popularity as a means for women to overcome or combat sexism. Self-Assertion for Women by Pamela Butler and The Assertive Woman by Phelps and Austin are but two examples of excellent publications aimed at teaching women particular skills to use in overcoming sexist remarks and behavior patterns. These skills include such techniques as avoiding negative self-labeling, learning how to overcome passivity, setting limits, recognizing

legitimate rights, saying no to requests that infringe on these rights, and learning how to express negative feelings effectively.

I contend that assertiveness training could be equally effective in combatting racism. Typically, assertiveness training begins by outlining four different approaches to situations. These four approaches are: 1) passive or non-assertive behavior, 2) indirectly assertive behavior, 3) aggressive behavior, or 4) assertive behavior. Passive behavior or non-assertive behavior occurs when you permit others to infringe on your rights. You violate your own rights by failing to express your honest thoughts and feelings. The message which is conveyed is: "I don't count, but you do." My thoughts and feelings aren't worth listening to, but yours are. Indirectly assertive behavior is when you try to compromise between asserting your rights and being non-assertive by hinting at your true feelings. You might nonverbally indicate some of your ambivalence, but you are not openly expressing your thoughts and feelings. Aggressive behavior occurs when you stand up for rights in such a way that the rights of another are violated. The purpose of such behavior is to humiliate, dominate, or put down the other person rather than to simply and honestly express your own feelings or thoughts. The consequences are often the generation of hostility or conflict. Feelings are expressed in an inappropriate way and the message communicated is: "My feelings count and yours are unimportant."

In contrast to the above three styles, is an assertive approach to interactions. Assertive behavior occurs when you stand up for your legitimate rights in such a way that the rights of others are not violated. Thoughts and feelings are expressed in direct, honest, and appropriate ways. The key attitude is one of respect not deference. Rather than trying to appease or defer to the other person because they are older, more powerful, experienced, or knowledgeable, you respect your needs and rights as well as those of the other person, (Lange, p. 7-9).

I think that these four styles of interaction are very common in situations where racism is a problematic component. Assume for a moment that you are having dinner with a group of friends. One of your friends tells a joke with clear racist overtones. The friend makes a disclaimer at the beginning like, "I know I shouldn't repeat these jokes, but this is a good one." She/he then proceeds to tell the joke. Everyone at the table has a good laugh. How can and should one respond to that setting? It has been my experience that the first two approaches are the most predominantly used styles. You respond passively, cringing inwardly, but unwilling or unable to respond verbally to the situation. You are violating your

own rights by failing to express your honest thoughts and feelings. Or you may respond in an indirect manner. You may refuse to laugh, remain silent at the joke, look disturbed and hope that you are nonverbally registering a protest. The problem with this behavior is that it sends an ambivalent message. Others may note your displeasure, yet it will be difficult to confront since no feelings have been openly expressed. Your friends may feel uncomfortable, but are unlikely to be able to deal with that discomfort in a constructive manner. They may feel guilty or distressed or feel that you are being overly sensitive.

The third option of aggressive behavior is less likely to happen with a group of friends, but is a frequent response among strangers. When racist comments are made, the wounds may be too deep and too raw for a calm response. Thus an angry and hostile response often is elicited which can just escalate the exchange into an open conflict. In contrast to these minimally effective responses, I would suggest taking an assertive stand, explaining your feelings in an appropriate, legitimate manner without attacking or violating the rights of others.

I contend that assertive behavior is extremely important in combatting racism because all too often we opt for the easy way out. We opt to not make a scene, to be passive or indirect, rather than open about our beliefs. The problem is that too many silent anti-racists support the conclusion that racism is a thing of the past. The subtleties of on-going and growing racism in America are ignored. Perhaps no one in your circle of friends would overtly tell racist jokes or certainly not without making a disclaimer first. Yet, that does not mean that racism is a thing of the past. It merely means that we are promoting a myth of color-blindness, a myth that says anyone can make it in America; that we no longer discriminate against anyone based on race. The fallacies in that belief are all too real:

> In a recent CBS/New York Times poll, for example, two thirds of all whites said blacks had made "a lot of progress" in the last ten to fifteen years. Most blacks, however, took a firmly contrary view. And in a recent "State of the Nation" survey, white Americans rated racism thirty first among the problems facing the nation. (Whites in that survey rated racism less of a problem than the communist movements in France and Italy.) Yet blacks, in the same survey, said racism was the number one problem facing America... In a recent CBS/New York Times poll, one third of all whites said, yes, they would mind if a black family moved next door. (Olson, pp. 16, 22-23)

The same poll reports that only about one black in three thinks we have any hope of ending racial prejudice and discrimination in the U.S. (Olson, p. 28). Thus it would seem clear that racism is still a problem and it is not a problem that

will go away.

Given that racism is a ubiquitous problem whose subtleties appear in many social situations, what prevents us from confronting this problem and honestly owning and expressing our values and feelings? Albert Ellis identifies typical irrational ideas or values that prevent us from thinking and acting asertively. I would like to briefly examine five typical barriers to assertive reponses to racism. Barrier 1: I feel responsible for the other person's feelings. This is irrational because no one can be responsible for the feelings of another. We can only control our own feelings. If you are assertive about expressing your displeasure over a racial joke, your friend may or may not be hurt or upset. Many people prefer to be dealt with openly and directly. Even if your friend does feel upset or taken aback, you can let them know you care about them while simultaneously being direct about your values and beliefs. Most people are not so vulnerable and fragile that they will be shattered by your comments.

A second barrier is: If I assert myself, others will get mad at me. This is an irrational inference since you do not know what the effects of assertion will be. The person may react positively, neutrally, or negatively. Even if others do become angry and unpleasant, you can handle it without falling apart. Since assertion involves legitimate rights you do not have to feel responsible for the other person's anger. Many anxieties about negative consequences are unrealistic. Common fears are that others will reject you, think you are attacking them, or putting them down. However, assertiveness revolves around the value of standing up for your legitimate rights without attacking or threatening the rights of others. While negative results cannot always be avoided, they may occur less often and with less intensity than you anticipate.

A third barrier to successful assertion is: Lack of Persistence. You try once to express your opinion and then you give up. One technique to overcome this barrier is called "broken record". You sometimes need to consistently repeat your assertive position until you sound like a broken record. This can be a most effective way of making yourself heard. The important element in using the broken record technique is to repeat what you want in a calm manner without getting angry, irritated, or loud. You do not have to get caught up in answering questions like: "Who do you think you are to tell me I'm a racist or that I'm insensitive or offensive?" You can simply and calmly repeat your feelings.

A fourth barrier is one that strikes close to our central core and feelings of well-being: Being assertive will mean losing the approval of others. Many

folks have the irrational belief that it is essential to be loved or approved of by virtually everyone in the community. This is an unattainable goal which sets one up for self-defeat. Certainly I would like to be approved of by every significant person in my life, but I do not need such approval. If I am rejected for reacting assertively to a racist comment, I can determine whether or not my values are worth defending. If I see my values as being legitimate and important, then I can determine how to act based on those values rather than reacting or adapting to what I think others want to hear.

The final barrier is: Non-assertive behavior is really just being polite and considerate. It is not inconsiderate to consider your needs--sometimes even before the needs of others. Some people have been taught that it is impolite to disagree with someone who's older or has higher status. This so-called politeness may really be non-assertion. One way to differentiate between so-called "politeness" and nonassertiveness is to look at bodily reactions. If you are acting nonassertively, your body may signal tension in the form of a headache or a churning stomach. It is important to compare your values with your actions to insure that you are being congruent and not repressing your feelings due to learned social norms of alleged politeness. Consider these five barriers to be typical of the kinds of irrational thinking that limits effective behavior. While these barriers are typical, they by no means provide an exhaustive list of inhibiting barriers.

It is certainly important to be cognizant of barriers to assertive behavior. However, recognizing these barriers is only the first step. Next, it is important to note specific verbal approaches that can be used to combat verbal examples of racism. I would like to briefly consider three types of assertive techniques that could be used to confront examples of racism. The three approaches are: 1) confrontative assertion, 2) anger assertion, and 3) repetition through skills like the "broken record" and "fogging."

A confrontative assertion is one that points our discrepancies in another person's behavior. The pattern for a confrontative assertion is: "We agreed on x, but you are doing y". A more specific example might be: "We agreed that you would give all of the new trainees equal time and attention, but you seem to be spending less time with the black trainees." This can be a direct, calm way of pointing out what you perceive to be discrepancies in an already agreed upon plan of action, company policy, or personal interaction norm.

A second approach is a helpful pattern for dealing with anger. In an anger assertion, you are striving to constructively express your anger and appropriately

address it toward the other's behavior, not toward them personally. Anger can generally be dealt with in one of three ways. You can deny it, project it, or own the feeling with an "I" message. You can deny feelings by saying both internally and orally, "I'm not bothered at all by what you've said or done." Conversely, you can project your feelings by sending a "you" message that generally comes across as a blaming attack and elicits defensiveness and hostility. For example, "You really are a narrow-minded bigot. How can you be so close-minded?" Finally, you could send an "I" message which acknowledges your feelings, the specific cause of the feelings, and the consequences of those feelings. You may even specify an alternative. Consider the following formula:

> I (describe feelings or reactions) when you (other's behavior) because (effect other's behavior has on you). I would rather you (specify alternative).

A specific example of the use that formula might sound like: I feel frustrated when you tell racial jokes because I find them to be inaccurate and demeaning. I would prefer you not tell them in my presence. Another possibility might be: I get angry when I notice that your interviews with black applicants are shorter than your interviews with white applicants because I feel we are missing out on good candidates who don't have sufficient time to demonstrate their qualifications. I would prefer that you would not terminate those interviews so quickly.

Finally, it may be necessary to reiterate your position when others object or try to ignore or discount your comments. You can assertively handle the responses of the other person through two techniques known as the "broken record" and "fogging." Persistence is an extremely important part of successful assertion. You need to keep repeating your position over and over again without getting angry, irritated or argumentative (Smith, p. 74). By speaking in a low, relaxed voice you can calmly and consistently state your position without backing down.

The second technique for handling objections or angry arguments from the other person is a style known as "fogging". By agreeing with the part of the statement that may be true, you can diffuse some of the person's anger and then repeat your position. This skill will allow you to receive criticism without becoming defensive or anxious by calmly acknowledging the probability of some truth to the statement, but then repeating your own feelings or beliefs. In addition, you may probe or ask for clarification, particularly if the person is suggesting a questionable argument. Consider the following dialogue as an illustration:

You: I think we should ask Clare to be a member of our sorority.

Susan: Are you crazy? We've never had blacks in our sorority.

You: That may be true, but I think Clare would be a good addition. (fogging and broken record)

Susan: What is wrong with you? Why would you even suggest such a thing?

You: I'm not sure what you mean. Why is there something wrong with me if I want to include Clare in our house? (probe for clarification)

Susan: You know she would never fit in.

You: You may believe that she wouldn't fit in, but I think we should try it and see how it works out. (fogging and broken record)

Susan: What are you, some kind of trouble-maker?

You: I'm not sure I understand. Why am I a troublemaker if I encourage a bright, interested woman like Clare to join our house? (probe)

Susan: You are always so involved in racial issues without considering the consequences. I have absolutely nothing against Clare, I hardly know her. But I do know that you are just too sensitive when it comes to issues involving racial equality.

You: I still think Clare would be a good member. Moreover, you may think I'm too sensitive about racial equality, but I think its important to express my feelings, particularly about a woman with as much potential to offer as Clare. (broken record, fogging)

Thus the skills of broken record, fogging and probing can be used to prevent the interaction from turning into a bitter confrontation, yet guarantee a persistent, repetition of your position.

Having seen that typical skills taught in women's assertiveness materials can be equally applicable in combatting racist situations, let us conclude by considering briefly the advantages of using assertive approaches to confront racism. First, assertive approaches provide you with a calm, reasonable way in which to express your feelings without infringing on the rights of others. Too often, we opt for silence as the easiest way out of an uncomfortable situation. However, silence can imply agreement with a racist comment, joke, or policy. The predominance of silent, anti-racists in this country allows the perpetuation of subtle and not-so-subtle forms of racism to continue in both social and work settings.

A second advantage of using assertiveness techniques is the increasing awareness you may create for other people. By expressing your attitudes and feelings, you may force the other person to re-examine their attitudes, habits, and behavior. They may realize subtle forms of racism which they had previously been unconscious of or had ignored. Creating such awareness may in some cases lead to attitudinal or even behavioral changes.

A third benefit of asserting your position is a personal advantage for yourself. You may increase your own self-esteem by acting on your discomfort, rather than feeling frustrated, tense or irritated. An unpublished study by Judy Demplewolff in 1974 demonstrated that group members' self-concepts significantly changed after assertion training (Lange, p. 13). Greater self-respect and self-confidence can reduce the need for other's approval. You are more likely to get your needs met and your preferences and beliefs respected.

Finally, assertive techniques provide you with a positive, constructive manner of handling anger and frustration rather than turning to aggressive approaches which are likely to escalate into severe conflict and bitterness. In addition to aggression, unexpressed anger can lead to depression. The depression results from feeling hopeless and helpless about a situation (Phelps, p. 123). Thus, assertion can provide a positive outlet for your feelings which can prevent aggression toward others and depression within yourself.

This paper has been a brief attempt to examine the commonalities between racism and sexism. After developing the analogy between the two, it is possible to contend that comparable techniques can be used for combatting both racism and sexism. Recognizing barriers to assertiveness and understanding the specific skills available for responding assertively to racist situations can reduce the possibility of both passive and aggressive responses. The benefits of using assertiveness training to combat racism should be recognizable on both an individual and societal level. Moreover, this paper should serve as an example of how many interpersonal skills can be applied and taught as necessary skills in intercultural/interracial communication contexts.

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Abstract

This paper is a practical attempt to demonstrate how specific skills taught in interpersonal communication classes can be utilized and applied in intercultural contexts. The paper outlines the similarities between racism and sexism in our society. It then explains typical assertiveness training techniques that women have been taught to utilize in combatting sexist remarks or jokes. The analogy between racism and sexism suggests that these techniques might be equally valuable in combatting racist remarks or jokes.